



Byzantine iconography of *The Nativity of the Virgin Mary* in the light of a homily of St. John Damascene*

Iconografía bizantina de la *Natividad de la Virgen María* a la luz de una homilía de San Juan Damasceno

Iconografia bizantina da *Natividade da Virgem Maria* à luz de uma Homilia de São João Damasceno

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Abstract: As a result of the fact that the New Testament mentions little episodes and provides very few details of the real life of the Virgin Mary, several pious apocryphal legends emerged during the first centuries between the eastern Christian communities, which tried by all means to solve this hermetic silence surrounding the birth, childhood, youth, adulthood and death of the Mother of Jesus. These apocryphal accounts were then assumed and interpreted by numerous Church Fathers, theologians and sacral orators. These reflections of such prestigious thinkers structured a solid corpus of doctrine from which several devotions and Marian liturgical feasts of great importance would arise shortly after. The supernatural birth of Mary, after her miraculous conception in the womb of her elderly and sterile mother Anne, is a primary milestone in her “imaginary” life. As natural fruit of these heterogeneous

* I want to thank my daughter María Gabriela Salvador D'Ambrosio for revising and correcting my English translation of this paper.

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SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia Ars 2 (2015/1)*

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O Poder das Imagens. Ideias e funções das representações artísticas

The Power of Images. Ideas and functions of artistic representations

Jan-Jun 2015/ISSN 1676-5818

literary and theological sources, the European medieval art and, in a very special way, the Byzantine one, addressed with remarkable enthusiasm the iconographic theme of *The Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, especially since the 10th-11th centuries, as one of the most significant episodes in the life of the *Theotókos*. On this basis, our paper proposes a triple complementary objective. First and foremost, it will highlight the content of the apocryphal sources and some thoughts or patristic exegesis on the subject, with particular emphasis in the homilies of St. John Damascene. Secondly, it will look at some Byzantine paintings on *The Nativity of Mary*, to determine to what extent the apocryphal accounts and the exegetical or doctrinal reflections on this Marian event are reflected in the characters, situations, attitudes, accessories and scenic items represented in these paintings. Finally, it will suggest some author's interpretations which seem plausible on the possible symbolic meanings underlying in this relevant, dogmatic core and in its corresponding iconographic theme.

Resumen: Como consecuencia de que el Nuevo Testamento menciona escasos episodios y brinda muy pocos detalles de la vida real de la Virgen María, entre las comunidades cristianas orientales surgieron durante los primeros siglos varias leyendas piadosas apócrifas, que trataron por todos los medios de suplir ese hermético silencio en torno al nacimiento, infancia, juventud, adultez y muerte de la Madre de Jesús. Esos relatos apócrifos fueron luego asumidos e interpretados por numerosos Padres de la Iglesia, teólogos y oradores sacros. Esas reflexiones de tan prestigiosos pensadores constituyeron un sólido cuerpo doctrinario del que se derivarían poco después varias devociones y fiestas litúrgicas marianas de extraordinaria importancia. Hito primordial en esa "imaginaria" vida de María es su sobrenatural nacimiento, tras su milagrosa concepción en el seno de su anciana y estéril madre Ana. Como fruto natural de esas heterogéneas fuentes literarias y teológicas, el arte medieval europeo y, de modo muy especial, el bizantino, abordaron con notable entusiasmo el tema iconográfico de la *Natividad de la Virgen María* a partir, sobre todo, de los siglos X-XI, como uno de los episodios más significativos de la vida de la *Theotokos*. Sobre esta base, en nuestra Ponencia nos proponemos un triple objetivo complementario. Pondremos, ante todo, en luz el contenido de las fuentes apócrifas y algunas consideraciones o exégesis patristicas sobre el tema, con especial énfasis en las homilias de San Juan Damasceno. En segundo lugar, analizaremos algunas obras pictóricas bizantinas sobre la *Natividad de María*, para determinar hasta qué punto los relatos apócrifos y las reflexiones exegeticas o doctrinales sobre este acontecimiento mariano se reflejan en los personajes, situaciones, actitudes, accesorios y elementos escenográficos escenografía representados en esas pinturas. Por último, sugeriremos ciertas interpretaciones personales que juzgamos plausibles sobre los posibles significados simbólicos subyacentes en este relevante núcleo dogmático y en su correspondiente tema iconográfico.



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The Power of Images. Ideas and functions of artistic representations

Jan-Jun 2015/ISSN 1676-5818

Keywords: Medieval Art – Byzantine Iconography – Virgin Mary – Nativity of the Virgin – St. John of Damascus.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval – Iconografía bizantina – Virgen María – Natividad de la Virgen – San Juan Damasceno.

ENVIADO: 01.05.2015

ACEPTADO: 05.06.2015

I. Introduction

Together with *The Nativity of Jesus*, *The Nativity of Mary* is one of the most cherished items in popular devotion and in Christian iconography of the Middle Ages.² It is well known that, after the Council of Ephesus (431), the cult of Mary was intensified in a meaningful way, especially in Syria, where St. John Damascene (c. 675-c. 749)³ comes from. We will try in this paper to discuss a dense homily given by this conspicuous Church Father on this concrete marian episode, as well as to analyze some works of art that represent the byzantine iconographic theme of the birth of the Virgin Mary, in order to see whether and to what extent one can appreciate any direct relationship between that doctrinal text and these artistic images.

Lacking biblical and historical foundations, the story of the Nativity of Mary was built from an early date by three apocryphal texts: the *Proto-Gospel of James*⁴ (2nd century), the *Gospel of the Pseudo Matthew*⁵ (c. 4th century) and

² This paper was presented as a lecture at the *International Congress “María, signo de identidad de los pueblos cristianos. Religión, Antropología, Historia y Arte”*, Gibraltar, Shrine of our Lady of Europe, Europa Retreat Center, March 5-7, 2010.

³ Priest and monk in the monastery of St. Sabas in Jerusalem, a brilliant speaker, fervent eulogist and outstanding theologian, respected as one of the last Fathers of the Greek Church, St. John Damascene (c. 675-c. 749) was the first and most ardent supporter of the veneration of images during the iconoclastic repression, promoted in Byzantium by the emperors Leo III and Constantine V.

⁴ *Protoevangelio de Santiago (Proto-Gospel of James)*. Bilingual Greek /Spanish text, published in Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos* (collection of Greek and Latin texts, critical version, studies and introductory comments by Aurelio de Santos Otero), Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 13^a impresión, 2006, p. 130-170. In the subsequent notes of this paper this apocryphal will be cited with the acronym *PES*.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia Ars 2* (2015/1)

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the *Book of the Nativity of Mary*⁶ (datable toward the 9th century, merely a synthesis of the precedent apocryphal text). This apocryphal literature on the early years of the Mother of God contributed not a little to introduce and propagate the liturgical feast and the iconography of the Nativity of the Virgin. In the Byzantine context the emergence and spread of the aforementioned Marian solemnity will be explained to a large extent thanks to several sermons preached by St. Andrew of Crete (660-740) in the early years of the 8th century, as well as to other exegetical commentaries of some Fathers of the Eastern Church, among them those of Saint John Damascene.

All these teachings of revered representatives of the official doctrine imposed a stamp of “legitimacy” to Marian devotion promoted by the mentioned apocrypha. In the West, on the contrary, this liturgical feast, in deriving from non-canonical sources, will take a long time to be implemented, as it begun to be accepted in part only since the end of the 7th century.

Synthesizing what is described in the three apocrypha mentioned before – the Proto-Gospel of James, the *Gospel of the Pseudo Matthew* and the *Book of the Nativity of Mary* –, the details that configure this marial event can be summarized as follows: in the absence of progeny after twenty years of marriage, the already elderly Joachim and Anne, the future parents of Mary, promised to God to devote the son that He would grant them by exceptional grace,⁷ a miracle that they generally seek in their regular visits to the temple during the Jewish traditional festivities.⁸

Visiting once more the sanctuary in Jerusalem at the Feast of the Dedication, Joachim was kicked out of the temple by the priest, who rejected his offerings, arguing that one who had well-deserved the curse of God for not having offspring has not the right to move closer to the dwelling place of Yahweh.⁹

⁵ *Evangelio del Pseudo Mateo (Gospel of the Pseudo Matthew)*. Bilingual Latin/Spanish text, published in Santos Otero, *op. cit.*, p. 173-236. In the subsequent notes of this paper this apocryphal will be cited with the acronym *EPM*.

⁶ *Libro de la Natividad de María (Book of the Nativity of Mary)*. Bilingual Latin/Spanish text, published in Santos Otero, *op. cit.*, p. 238-252. In the subsequent notes of this paper this apocryphal will be cited with the acronym *LNLM*.

⁷ *PES*, I, 1; *EPM*, I, 2; *LNLM*, I, 3.

⁸ *LNLM*, I, 3.

⁹ *PES*, I, 2; *EPM*, II, 1; *LNLM*, II, 1.



Burdened with shame by this humiliating rejection, Joachim took refuge in the countryside next to his pastors, instead of returning home, for not to be subjected to the derision of his fellow countrymen.¹⁰ A few months later in the solitude of the mountains, an angel told him that his sterile wife would give birth to a daughter, predestined to be the Mother of the Son of God, who would be named Jesus.¹¹ The angel revealed to Anne the same message, before telling her to go to the meeting of Joachim at the entrance of the city.¹² When both spouses met in front of the Golden Gate, they embraced each other with joy¹³ and, after worshiping God, returned to their home.¹⁴ Nine months after that encounter, Anne gave birth to a girl, whom, in accordance with the angel's warning,¹⁵ put the name of Mary.¹⁶

II. Interpretation of the Nativity of Mary from the theological perspective of St. John Damascene

The doctrinal exegesis that this miraculous birth aroused are countless among the Church Fathers and Christian theologians. The aim of this brief essay is to focus our attention exclusively on the propositions that Saint John Damascene made on the birth of Mary in a homily delivered on the occasion of this Marian feast.¹⁷

The sage of Damascus produced in this homily an anthology of dogmatic and catechetical arguments, of suggestive, poetic sense and strong symbolic bias, which could be summed up in seven theological sentences, essentially and

¹⁰ PES, I, 3-4; EPM, II, 1; LNM, II, 2.

¹¹ EPM, III, 1-4; LNM, III, 1-4.

¹² PES, IV, 1; EPM, III, 5; LNM, IV, 1-2.

¹³ According to some interpreters, this embrace is a metaphor for the carnal intercourse between the spouses after so long mutual estrangement, an embrace that would be fruitful in the immediate conception of Mary. Other authors, however, understand this embrace as a normal gesture of affection, because they believe that Mary was conceived in a virginal manner, without male intervention.

¹⁴ PES, IV, 3-4; EPM, III, 5; LNM, V, 1-2.

¹⁵ PES, V, 2; EPM, IV; LNM, V, 2.

¹⁶ According to *Protoevangelio de Santiago*, Anne gave his daughter the name of Mary only after fulfilling the legal time to purify herself of childbirth: "having elapsed time marked by the law, Anne was purified, gave the chest to the girl and he called his name Mariam." (PES, V, 2).

¹⁷ In the current paper we use the bilingual edition (Greek/French): S. Jean Damascène, *Homélie sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (Texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes par Pierre Voulet), Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, Coll. Sources Chrétiennes, 1961, 211 p.

intricately interconnected: the Mary's Nativity means the epiphany of the supernatural, the promise and certification of her perpetual virginity, the prelude to her divine motherhood, the prophetic proclamation of the dual nature of Christ, the sign of the regeneration of mankind, the ratification of a new alliance, and the prophetic announcement of the Redemption.

II.1. The Nativity of Mary, an epiphany of the supernatural

Ignoring the implausible details imagined by the Apocrypha and the popular legends, John Damascene emphasizes, first of all, two genuine signs of the miraculous intervention of God in the birth of Mary. A first divine miracle is that the congenital sterility of Anne –with which God inhibited nature in her, preventing him from being fertile before conceiving to Mary– has proved fruitful precisely in her old age, when God gave him the power to engender miraculously to the future mother of the Redeemer. Moved by such a wonder, John Damascene rejoices: “Let the Hearth trust! «Sons of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God,» because the desert «has greened»: the woman who was sterile has borne her fruit.”¹⁸

A second miracle, even more marvelous and supernatural, is the fact that the sterile and old Anne gives birth to an immaculate girl, firstborn and only-begotten daughter, intended to be, in turn, the mother of another firstborn and only-begotten Son of God. The Syrian author points this out in these terms:

Nature has yielded to the grace, has stopped trembling and did not want to be the first. Just as the Virgin Mother of God had to be born of Anne, Nature did not dare to prevent bear the fruit of grace, but remained without fruit until the grace produced its own. It was necessary that the One who had to bring forth “the firstborn of all creation”, in which “everything remains”, was born as a firstborn daughter.¹⁹

The controversial problem of the way in which Mary was conceived arises here immediately, a problem that so many and so acute discussions give rise to over the centuries between the Christian thinkers, without excluding certain

¹⁸ S. Jean Damascène, *Homélie sur la Nativité*, 1-2. In: Voulet, *op. cit.*, p. 69. In the subsequent notes of this paper this homily will be cited with the abbreviation Damascène, *op. cit.* All the textual quotations of this homily of John Damascene inserted in the text and notes of the current paper are translations made by us from the French version of Voulet (*op. cit.*).

¹⁹ Damascène, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

saints of fervent Marian devotion, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas. In that order of ideas, the three apocryphal sources already aforementioned seem to advocate the belief that the Virgin was engendered by divine intervention, without any male input, i.e., according to an immaculate conception.

Even when none of these three apocryphal writings precise clearly if Joachim intervened or not in the genesis of Mary, they underline that, in agreement with the announcement of the angel, Anne was already certain of having conceived even before being reunited with her husband in front of the Golden Gate. The Proto-Gospel of *James*, for example, notes without any doubt: “And when Joachim arrived with his herds, Anne was at the door. This, seeing him coming, ran away and pounced on his neck, saying: «Now I see that God has blessed me abundantly, since, being widow, I cease being it, being sterile, I will conceive in my womb».”²⁰ The *Gospel of the Pseudo Matthew* is even much more explicit, when it specifies that Anne, at the very moment of her reunion with her lengthy absent husband, tells him: “I have conceived in my bowels.”²¹ Alien to such optimistic presumption of the Apocrypha, Saint John Damascene shows greater caution in assuming without reservation the immaculate conception of Mary, and in some passages even seem to dismiss it. His position on this is, truly, quite ambiguous. Thus, in a homily given in honor of the Nativity of Mary, he exclaims: “Happy bowels of Joachim, of which came from «a seed absolutely immaculate»; admirable is the Anne’s, thanks to whom a baby girl all holy developed slowly, where she was formed and was born!”²² Such a sentence seems to affirm at the same time the natural parental intervention (“the bowels of Joachim”) and the supernatural generation of his daughter (“a seed absolutely immaculate”).

Similarly, John Damascene accepts, apparently, in another moment the genesis perfectly natural (in accordance with the nature, like that of any other

²⁰ *PES*, IV, 4.

²¹ “But [Anne] was already tired and even boring of such waiting [the return of her husband], when suddenly raised her eyes and saw Joachim that came with his herds. And immediately ran out to meet him, pounced on his neck and gave thanks to God by saying: «Recently I was a widow, and already am not; not long ago it was sterile, and behold that I have conceived in my bowels ». This meant that all the neighbors and acquaintances will be filled with joy, to the extent that all the land of Israel was delighted by a pleasant new.” (*EPM*, infra III, 5).

²² Damascène, *op. cit.*, p. 49.



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Jan-Jun 2015/ISSN 1676-5818

human being) of the Virgin, by physical intervention of the two parents, still having been preceded by a long life of chastity by both. The doctor of Damascus unequivocally confirms it this way, in asserting that, thanks to their lifetime chastity, Joachim and Anne merited a gift from the Almighty that exceeds the nature, namely the fathering to Mary, who was to become the Mother of God without needing husband to do this.²³

Despite what has been said, John Damascene believes that the eventual lack of basis for endorsing with exhaustive certainty the immaculate conception of the Virgin does not deprive the exceptional privilege to be free of original sin. The Syrian theologian argues, in effect, with poetic emphasis that Mary escaped the clutches of the Evil, and was preserved intact in the nuptial chamber of the Holy Spirit, in order to become at the same time the wife and the carnal mother of God.²⁴

Finally, after defending the exemption from original sin, the thinker of Damascus fully subscribes to the idea of other exegetes and theologians, claiming that Mary was born in supernatural and miraculous way, without causing any pain to her mother during childbirth. He states it so, exultant:

«Let all of us enjoy the feast» by the birth of the Mother of God. Rejoice, Anne, «sterile, who did not give birth; explode in shouts of joy and happiness, you that had not suffered the labor pains!»²⁵

II.2. The Nativity of Mary, promise and certification of her perpetual virginity

The thesis that Mary, having being conceived herself immaculately, conceived and gave birth to her son Jesus while remaining a virgin before, during and after childbirth happens to be the theory more emphatically and repeatedly

²³ “Joachim and Anne, a couple very chaste, «pair of turtledoves» in the mystic sense! By observing the law of nature; the chastity, you have deserved the gifts that exceed nature: you have given birth to the world a Mother of God without husband. After a pious and holy existence in a human nature, you have fathered a daughter superior to Angels and now reigns on the angels.” (*Ibid.*, p. 59).

²⁴ “Wholly saint daughter of Joachim and Anne, that escaped from the gaze of the Principalities and Dominions and «of the swollen traits of the Evil», you who have lived through in the nuptial chamber of the Holy Ghost, and were preserved intact, to become wife and mother of God by nature !” (*Ibid.*, p. 63).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.



defended by John Damascene, in full accordance with the firm and almost unanimous opinion of the other Church Fathers which preceded him. The Syrian eulogist attests to this bluntly: “Having led a chaste and holy life, you [Joachim and Anne] have produced the jewel of the virginity, which must remain virgin before the birth, virgin during the birth and virgin after the birth, the only always virgin of soul and body.”²⁶

According to the Syrian author, it would be desirable that this exceptional virginity emerged from the chastity (the Virgin Mary born of Anne and Joachim) would carry bodily the single and only-begotten Light (Jesus Christ), thanks to that Being (God the Father) who begot him bodiless, making him into the eternally and necessarily engendered Being, although not begetter (God the Son).²⁷ After stating that Mary was conceived in a virginal way and without the original stain, John Damascene declares that she, by the grace of the Almighty, always remains virgin before, during and after conceiving to his son Jesus in a virginal manner, without male intervention, as he already has an everlasting and divine Father, and does not require temporary and human father.²⁸

The saint of Damascus also represents the perpetual virginity of Mary through the poetic metaphor according to which the Virgin is a door always closed (similar to the idea of the *Hortus conclusus*), which, while still and always remaining sealed, will allow the entry (the virginal conception) and the exit (the virginal birth) of Christ, who, in turn, is the “gateway to the east”, through which men have access to God.²⁹

For this reason, Mary –whom he defines as “Gate of God always virginal!”³⁰ and as “heart pure and without blemish, who sees and desires God without

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “It was convenient, in effect, that the virginity born of chastity would produce the single and only-begotten light, bodily, by the benevolence of the One who begot her without body, the Being who does not breed, but is always begotten, to whom to be begotten is his only personal property.” (*Ibid.*).

²⁸ “Oh daughter always virgin, who could conceive without human intervention! For the One whom you conceived has an eternal Father. Oh Daughter of the earthly race, you who held the creator in your divinely maternal arms!” (*Ibid.*, p. 65).

²⁹ “Today the east gate has been built, which will give Christ «entry and exit»; and «this door will be closed»; in it is Christ, «the door of the sheep»; «his name is Orient»: by him we have obtained access to the Father, principle of light.” (*Ibid.*, p. 55).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.



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spot!”³¹— stands in the eyes of all humans as the prototype and paradigm of the virginity, worthy of all praise.³²

II.3. The Nativity of Mary, a prelude to her divine motherhood

The theologian of Damascus set a perfect analog parallel –with partial similarity and partial difference– between the current birth of Mary and the future birth of Jesus. The double similarity is reflected in the fact that the Virgin and Christ are both firstborn and only-begotten children, she from a sterile mother (Anne), he from a virgin mother (Mary), which begets the firstborn among many brethren (Jesus Christ), to whom she provides with a flesh and a blood similar to those of other men.³³

On the other hand, the partial difference between the birth of Mary and that of Jesus are visible in the fact that, while she is the only-begotten daughter of two parents (Joachim and Anne), the privilege of being the unique only-begotten son is reserved only to Jesus Christ as the single Son of a single Father (God), and the only child of a single mother (Mary), who did not need the male intervention for engendering him. So the Father of the Eastern Church expresses in reference to Mary: “He [God] does not made you be born of a single father, or of a single mother, so that the privilege of begotten son would be kept in perfect manner for the unique only-begotten son: he is, in effect, the only Son, the only offspring of a single father, and the only-begotten of a single mother.”³⁴

In another fragment of his homily the Syrian saint spells out in lyrical circumlocutions the same argument of the divine motherhood of Mary, pointing out: “On this [Mary’s] womb the unlimited Being has come to dwell; in her milk God, the child Jesus, has been nourished. (...) Here you see the

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Rightly all the generations proclaim you blessed, you are the distinguished glory of mankind. You are the honor of the priesthood, the hope of Christians, the plant of the fruitful virginity, because it is through you by whom the prestige of virginity has been extended until the remoteness.” (*Ibid.*, p. 77).

³³ “Holy is the Strong, the Son of God, and God the only-begotten, who today makes you birth, the firstborn daughter of a sterile mother, for that he, being the same only Son of the Father and « the firstborn of every creature », born from you, the only child of a Virgin-Mother, « the firstborn among many brethren », similar to us and participant by you in our flesh and our blood.” (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

³⁴ *Ibid.*



hands that hold to God, and those knees are a throne higher than the Cherubim.”³⁵

With a strong conviction about the truth of this dogma, John Damascene does not hesitate to proclaim in honor of Mary, challenging the followers of Nestorius: “«You are blessed among women, and the fruit of your womb is blessed.» Those who confess your divine motherhood are blessed, and cursed those who deny it.”³⁶

II.4. The Nativity of Mary, a prophetic proclamation of the double nature of Christ

Against the heretical thesis of the Monophysites and Nestorians, John Damascene defends that Jesus Christ –whom he defines as eternal, immaterial, disembodied light (God the Son), arising from the eternity of the eternal light (God the Father)– owns two natures, divine and human, in a single, undivided person, because, in receiving a human body of Mary, he becomes a man without ceasing to be God. In the words of the doctor of Damascus:

Yes, there are in him two natures, despite the madness of the Headless, a single person, whatever the anger of the Nestorians! The eternal light, originated before the centuries from the eternal light, the immaterial, bodiless being, takes a body from this woman, and as a husband moves forward out of the bridal chamber, being God, and then made into son of earthly race.³⁷

For this reason, in another extract of his homily, the enthusiastic Syrian Mariologist does not hesitate to extol the miraculous, indissoluble union of divinity and humanity which, by the grace of God, the newborn Virgin Mary will conceive later in her womb:

Oh! How many wonders, and such an amount of alliances in this little girl! Oh, Daughter of the sterility, virginity that gives birth, divinity and humanity, suffering and impassivity, life and death will join in her, so that in all things the less perfect be defeated by the best!³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71-72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.



II.5. The Nativity of Mary, a sign of the regeneration of Mankind

Following other exegetes, John Damascene argues that the birth of the Virgin also marks the final rescue of the fallen Mankind. In his view, a new Eve was born with Mary, who will engender that new Adam, which is the God made flesh, conceived in a virginal womb to redeem men of the original guilt. So, in reference to Mary he declares, somewhat apodictic:

Since your birth, the woman which fell into sin [Eve] is raised. Daughter all saint, the splendour of the female sex! If the first Eve, in effect, was found guilty of transgression, and if by her “death has made its entry”, because she placed herself at the service of the serpent against our first father, Mary, on the other hand, who became the slave of the divine will, has deceived the misleading serpent and has been introduced into the world of immortality.³⁹

The Syrian doctor insists in highlighting the contrast between the old Eve, whom God, as punishment for her original sin, condemns to give birth with pain and to be subjected to her husband, and Mary, the new Eve, full of grace and favorite of the Lord.⁴⁰ Thus, he does not hesitate to sing with joy the glory of the mother of Jesus, “Honorable daughter of God, the beauty of human nature, rehabilitation of Eve, our first mother.”⁴¹

His doctrinal position is not very different when in another moment he invites the faithful to rejoice in the birth of Mary. Through her –he argues–, God the Father will engender his Son, the Word, who is predestined to improve in essence the human nature; therefore, being the man (by his condition of mixture of spirit and matter) the unifying link between the visible creation and the invisible, the Son of God, in joining the human nature, joins by this the whole creation.⁴²

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ By opposing Eve to Mary, John Damascene expresses: “One [Eve], in fact, heard the divine judgment: «You will give birth children with pain»; the other [Mary]: «Enjoy, full of grace»; the first: «You will submitted to your husband»; this one: «The Lord is with you.»” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴² “The whole creation dampen and sing the holy birth of a holy woman. Since she gave birth to the world an imperishable treasure of goods. By her the creator has transformed the whole of nature in a better state, by means of the humanity. Because, if the man, which is in the middle between spirit and matter, is the bond of all the visible creation and invisible, the creative Word of God, joining the human nature, joined by her to the whole of creation.” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).



II.6. The Nativity of Mary, a ratification of a New Covenant

For some Church Fathers, theologians and ecclesiastical writers, above all in the eastern area, the birth of Mary marks the start of the New Alliance, that God seals with mankind, exhausted after the interim conferred to the Old Testament. The previous mosaic law, benefitting exclusively the “chosen people”, is replaced by the new Christian commandment of universal love, for the good of all mankind. For this reason, Saint John Damascene states that the ancient temple of the Old Covenant, built by the carnal Solomon with stones and gold, is now replaced by another new spiritual temple (Mary), built and inhabited by the new spiritual Solomon (God), to accommodate her divine Son after the fertilizing glow of the Holy Ghost.⁴³

Then, after arguing that the replacement of the Old Covenant by the New one –“By means of you « the change in Law » was accomplished, and the spirit hidden under the letter was revealed”⁴⁴– occurs with Mary, the Syrian eulogist refers once more to the New Covenant, which God deals with all men after the advent of the indissoluble couple Mary/Jesus, highlighting the leading role exercised by the Virgin, as a new liberated woman. In his opinion, in effect, contrary to the other women, subject to the man, the Virgin Mary has God the Father as the only Lord, who governs a new alliance with men, by sending his Son, the Word, by means of the Holy Ghost. It is precisely this last divine Person who, as a divine and spiritual seed, impregnates Mary, without the need for carnal intercourse with man, in order to make possible the incarnation of the Word of God.⁴⁵

⁴³ In that order of ideas John Damascene states: “Virgin full of divine grace, holy temple of God, that the Solomon in the spirit, the Prince of peace [Jesus Christ], has built and inhabits it; the inanimate gold and stones do not embellish you, but, better than the gold, the Spirit constitutes your splendour. As precious stones you have the completely valuable pearl, Christ, the embers of divinity.” (*Ibid.*, p. 73).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ In reference to Mary, John Damascene expresses: “The chief of every woman, in effect, is the male; but for her [Mary] that has not known man, God, the Father, has taken the place of his chief: by the Holy Ghost He concluded an alliance, and, as a divine and spiritual seed, sent his Son and his Word, this powerful force. In virtue of the good pleasure of the Father, it is not using a natural union, but above the laws of nature, by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, as the Word incarnated and dwelt among us. Since the union of God with men was fulfilled by the Holy Ghost.” (*Ibid.*, p. 53).



II.7. The Nativity of Mary, a prophetic announcement of the Redemption

Many Church Fathers, theologians and apologists of East and West also underline the idea of the birth of the Virgin as an anticipatory preamble of the Redemption: the birth of Mary, predestined by God to be the Mother of Jesus, marks the start of the redeeming process that the latter will undertake with his earthly life and his death on the cross.

Not otherwise means John Damascene's metaphor that imagines Mary as a new Eve, mother of a new man, who, being at the same time God incarnate, will redeem Mankind destroyed by the Primeval Sin: a new Eve capable of lifting to the former Eve of her fall, a new Eve who, after breaking the head of the tempting serpent, introduces in the world, through her Son Jesus Christ, the final immortality, which overcomes death introduced by the Original Sin.⁴⁶

Thus, after inviting believers to celebrate the innovative fertility regenerated in Mary (her miraculous conception by sterile parents) that allows us to rescue the treasures of the redemption,⁴⁷ John Damascene urges jubilant to all men to celebrate with joy the birth of Mary, that carries happiness for Mankind.⁴⁸ For this reason, he alleges that, if the Greeks expressed with all kinds of honors the feast of their false idols and the birthday of their cruel monarchs, the Christians should honor with greater reason the feast of the birthday of the Mother of God, through whom Mankind as a whole was redeemed, transforming into joy the sorrow of Eve.⁴⁹ Therefore, the apologist of Damascus preaches with enjoyment before the birth of Mary:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ "So let us celebrate the disappearance of the human sterility, because it has ceased for us the disease that prevented the possession of the goods." (*Ibid.*, p. 49).

⁴⁸ "Come, all the nations, come, men of every race, of every language, of all ages, of all dignity; with joy let us celebrate the nativity of the joy of the world!" (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

⁴⁹ "If the Greeks identified with all kinds of honors –with the gifts that each who could offer– the anniversary of the gods, which were imposed upon the spirit through liars myths and darkened the truth, and the [anniversary] of the kings, even if these were the scourge of the whole of existence, what we should do in order to honor the anniversary of the Mother of God, by whom the deadly race full was transformed, by whom the sorrow of Eve, our first mother, was changed into joy?" (*Ibid.*).

Today is for the world the beginning of salvation. “Shout to the Lord, all the earth, sing, exult, tap instruments.” Raise your voice, “help others hear it without fear”! For in the holy Probatique pool the Mother of God has been born, from whom the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was pleased to be born.⁵⁰

Image 1



The Nativity of Mary, miniature of *Menologium of Basil II*, c. 985. Biblioteca Vaticana, Rome.

III. Reflections of the doctrine of Saint John Damascene in Byzantine paintings of the Nativity of Mary

With the aim of seeing if the Byzantine images that represent the theme of the birth of the Virgin reflected to some extent the thoughts of St. John Damascene, we will now look at some Byzantine paintings of the Nativity of Mary: a miniature of the *Menologium of Basil II*, c. 985 (Fig 1),⁵¹ the mosaic in the Greek monastery of Dafni (2nd half of the 11th century, Fig 2),⁵² the frescoes in the church of Hagia Sophia in Kiev, Ukraine (mid 11th century, Fig

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵¹ *The Nativity of Mary*, miniature of *Menologium of Basil III*, c. 985. Biblioteca Vaticana, Rome.

⁵² *The Nativity of Mary*, mosaic, 2nd half of 11th century. Monastery of Dafni, Greece.

7),⁵³ of St. Panteleimon in Nerezi, Republic of Macedonia, 1164 (Fig 3),⁵⁴ of Sopoćani, Serbia, v. 1265 (Fig 8), of the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia, 1295 (Fig 4),⁵⁵ the church of the king in the monastery of Studenica, Serbia, 1313-1314 (Fig 5),⁵⁶ and the mosaic of the monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Kariye Djami) in Istanbul, 1320-1321 (Fig 6).⁵⁷

Image 2



The Nativity of Mary, mosaic, 2nd half of 11th century. Monastery of Dafni, Greece.

⁵³ *The Nativity of Mary*, fresco (mid 11th century), Hagia Sofia, Kiev, Ukraine.

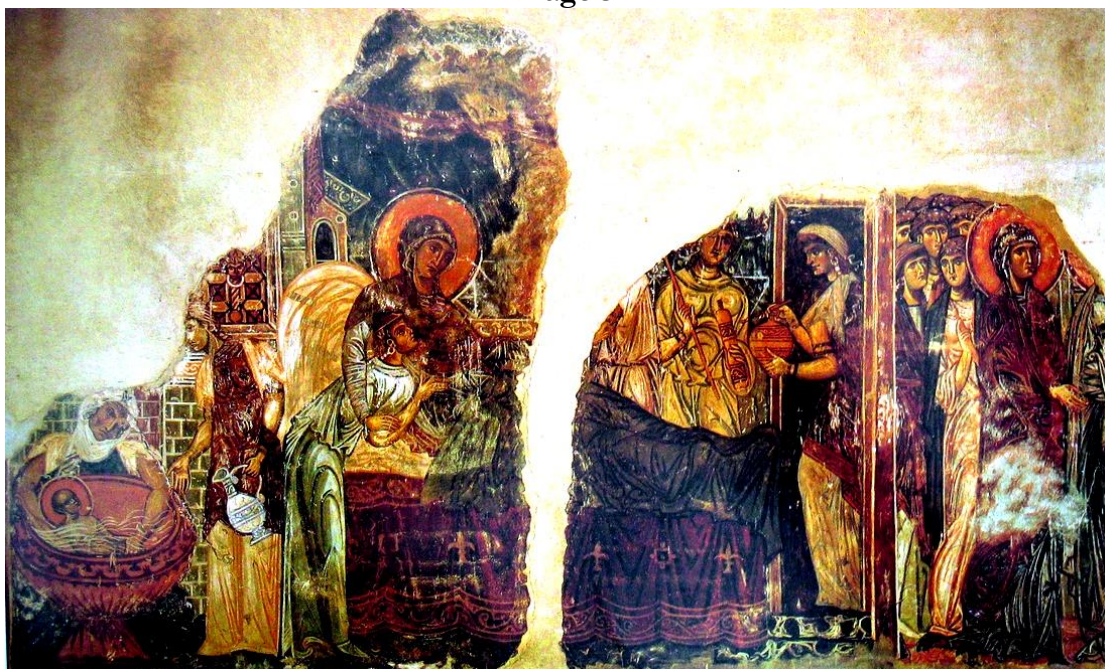
⁵⁴ *The Nativity of Mary*, fresco, 1164. Church of S. Panteleimón, Nerezi, Republic of Macedonia.

⁵⁵ *The Nativity of Mary*, fresco, 1295. Church of Panagia Peribleptos (currently St. Clement). Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia.

⁵⁶ *The Nativity of Mary*, fresco, 1313-1314. Monastery of Studenica, church of the king, Studenica, Serbia.

⁵⁷ *The Nativity of Mary*, mosaic, 1320-1321, Monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Kariye Djami), Istanbul.

Image 3



The Nativity of Mary, fresco, 1164. Church of S. Panteleimón, Nerezi, Republic of Macedonia.

Since none of the three aforementioned apocryphal writings provides accurate data on the birth of Mary, except for the brief mention that the *Proto-Gospel of James* makes on a midwife and a cot,⁵⁸ during the Middle Ages the artists and designers in the iconographic programs interested in this marian episode added by their account some fabulous details and anecdotes highly emotional.

Combined the various details proposed in this narrative iconographic theme by the Byzantine artists, the different representations of the Nativity of Mary usually have in common certain essential elements, relating to characters, attitudes, actions, situations, scenery and accessories.

⁵⁸ “And when it was time for Anne, and the ninth month she gave birth. And she asked the midwife: « What is it that I have given birth? » and the midwife replied: « a girl ». Then Anne exclaimed: « My soul has been today uplifted ». And she leaned to the baby in the crib.” (*PES*, V,2).

Image 4



The Nativity of Mary, fresco, 1295. Church of Panagia Peribleptos (currently St. Clement). Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia.

With regard to the first four elements the artists match in general in the following guidelines: occupying the main sector of the painting, Anne, wholly dressed with ample draperies, remains seated or reclining on a bed, to signify the birth newly produced or still in process; the newly born appears almost always naked or half naked, in the arms of a midwife who is preparing to bathe her, while at times is dressed or covered with stripes (sometimes she is represented twice, at the time of bathing, and sleeping in her crib or being deposited in the arms of her mother);⁵⁹ beside her, in the rear front, one or several sloping or squatting midwives wash the girl in a tub or stack, while another standing midwives can sometimes help to Anne, upholding her during or after the birth; some maids are close to the parturient to offer food and drink; Joachim appears very rarely, and, in this case, does so very discreetly in some remote corner of the scene.

⁵⁹ This rather rare situation of maternal/filial closeness may be perhaps be related to that admiring exclamation of John Damascene in honor of the newborn Mary: “Daughter of Adam and Mother of God! Happy the flanks and the womb from which you have sprout out! Happy the arms that holded you, the lips that have so much tasted your chaste kisses, the lips only of your parents, so that in everything you would ever keep always virgin.” (Damascene, *op. cit.*, p. 59).

Image 5



The Nativity of Mary, fresco, 1313-1314. Monastery of Studenica, church of the king, Studenica, Serbia.

The scenery is usually made up of the interior of a stately mansion, almost always scored by architectural elements of relative luxury. The accessories exhibit true opulence, appreciable in the splendid furniture, rich draperies, sumptuous bed with embroidered bed linen, trays with victuals and drink that the maids carry, a stack or bowl where the new-born is washed, and, sometimes, a beautiful cot, empty or already occupied by the newly born.

All these Byzantine paintings under analysis reflect more or less explicitly the labor suffered by Anne, who is still lying semi-reclining or reclining on the bed, while some midwives and servants look after her. The fresco of Studenica maximizes such incidence, for it represents the parturient with the belly still prominent by the ungraspable overbearing, thighs open and face sore, while, half-incorporated into the bed, is aided by two midwives who uphold her by both arms, in a mutual attitude easily interpretable as to make easier the effort of bid to produce the birth. A similar situation is observed in the fresco of Nerezi, where a young midwife holds the body and palpates the abdomen of the half-recumbent Anne, who looks in apparent labor.

This clear interest from the creators of the murals of Studenica and Nerezi by emphasizing the labor of the delivery manifest perhaps their desire to translate into images the laudatory praises targeted by John Damascene to Anne, for having given birth and breastfed the woman who later would engender and food the Creator and the feeder of the world. So the Syrian apologist said:

Bowels that carried an alive heaven, more extensive than the immensity of the heavens! (...) breast which nurtured the feeder of the world! Wonder of wonders, paradox of paradoxes! Yes, the inexpressible incarnation of God, filled with condescendence, should be preceded by these wonders.⁶⁰

An episode almost always present, and without significant variants in details in these paintings (except Ohrid), is the ablution or bath of the new-born, which is undertaken in a stack, bathtub or bowl by one or two midwives and a maid. Rarely the newly born is already immersed in the stack (Dafni, Nerezi), since most frequently appears in the arms of a midwife moments before the bathing, while this one or another midwife introduces her hand in the tub to confirm the enough lukewarmness of the water, that a maid pours with a pitcher (*Menologium of Basil II*, Djami Kariye, Studenica, Sopoçani).

As a curious exception, the fresco of Ohrid omits, as it was mentioned, the conventional incident of the ablution of the new-born, an omission which could perhaps be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the Mary's immaculate conception and her exemption from original sin. Who knows if the designer of the iconographic program of Ohrid has sensed in his interior resound with the echo of the words of Damascene:

Here is why now a virgin comes to the world, enemy of the ancestral fornication; she is given as a wife to God in person, and she gives birth to the mercy of God. (...) From her, in fact, the beloved Son of God, in whom he placed their complacency, is born.⁶¹

On the other hand, contradicting the usual omission of Joachim in the Byzantine images of the Nativity of the Virgin, the fresco of Studenica and the mosaic of Kariye Djami granted some discreet prominence to him, placing him in the foreground as solicitous protector of his daughter, asleep in her crib, while a maid fans her (Studenica), or making him appear almost to sneak in a side door (Kariye Djami). It is obvious that the programers of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

iconography of both murals attempted to enhance the co-parental role, having perhaps in mind those sentences of John Damascene: “Rejoice, Joachim: from your daughter «a child is born to us, a child has been given to us», «and it will be given to him this name: Angel of Great Council» –that is to say, of the salvation of the universe–, «strong God».”⁶²

Or maybe they reminisced about those other praises that the Syrian eulogist dedicated to Joachim and Anne, considering that their holiness as a chaste couple was worthy of the holy child who was born to them.⁶³

As already indicated in various contexts, all the Byzantine paintings analyzed here represent an eclectic activity of midwives and servants, those washing to the new-born (and sometimes helping to the parturient), these providing the newborn cubs food and drinks, and even refreshing her with a fan (Dafni, Ohrid, Studenica, Kariye Djami). In exposing the narrative content staged by these female companions and their pragmatic interventions, the artists and their clients reaffirm in first instance the natural and quotidian dimension underlying in the supernatural event of the Nativity of the Mother of God, in order to present it as a normal birth, such as any ordinary parturient.

It is not inconceivable, however, that behind such an evident factual banality hide some symbolic significance. For example, if one would be receptive to the devout digressions of John Damascene on this issue, these foods, beverages and hospitality with which Anne was given on his bed could well be interpreted analogously as the tributes of gratitude that Mankind as a whole should offer to the couple, for having given birth to the future mother of the Redeemer. It is quite clear, in this regard, the thoughts of the orator of Damascus when he writes: “Joachim and Anne, happy couple! The whole creation is indebted to you; thanks to you it offered to the Creator the gift, the most excellent of all the gifts, a venerable Mother, the only worthy of the One who created her.”⁶⁴

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁶³ “Joachim and Anne, happy couple, and truly without blemish! (...) Your conduct was pleasing to God and worthy of the one who was born from you.” (*Ibid.*, p. 57).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Image 6



The Nativity of Mary, mosaic, 1320-1321, Monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora (Kariye Djami), Istanbul.

In the same range of ideas, in the light of the mind of John Damascene, you can –in these scenes of the nativity– interpret the fragile stamp of the defenseless new-born girl, protected and nursed by her mother, and blessed only by her two parents, as a discreet epiphany of the true glory and the power of Mary, winner of the Devil, Queen of the Angels, who render her escort, and is also acclaimed by men and women of all ages as the predestined by God. Our eulogist points it out so:

Daughter entirely holy, you appears in the arms of your mother, and you are the terror of the powers of rebellion. Daughter all holy, nourished by breast milk, and surrounded by the armies of the angels! Daughter loved by God, honor of your parents, the generations of generations call you blessed, as you rightly proclaimed.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

Maybe one could trace other footsteps –however imperceptible they may look– from John Damascene’s elucidations in some objects and accessories that populate the scene of these Byzantine paintings, ingredients whose possible symbolism is worth exploring. So, between the food offered by the maids to the parturient, some paintings include eggs –*Menologium of Basil II* (Fig. 1), mosaic of Dafni (Fig. 2), fresco from Hagia Sophia in Kiev (Fig. 7) –, eggs that some experts interpret as a clear metaphor for fertility and life.⁶⁶

Perhaps, therefore, the authors of these images, by introducing so significant nutrients, may have remembered those sentences set out by John Damascene, praising the fruitful fertility, promoter of the true life (Jesus), which the birth of Mary comes to produce from the sterility of her parents:

Today the doors of the sterility [of Joachim and Anne] are opened, and a door and virginal divine [Mary] is ahead: from her, through her, the God who is beyond all beings, must “come to the world” “bodily” (...) Today in the root of Jesse has sprouted a stem, which will raise through the world a flower substantially coupled with the divinity.⁶⁷

It should be noted that these eggs offered to the new parturient are symbolic metaphors not only for the human life which the new-born Mary access to in that moment, but for the eternal Life that her future son Jesus will ensure over the centuries to Mankind, after redeeming her from sin with his death on Calvary.

Not in vain Saint John Damascene exclaims in celebrating this Marian feast: “«A vineyard of beautiful branches» has sprouted from the Anne’s womb, and has produced a bunch full of sweetness, a nectar source sprung up for the inhabitants of the Earth in eternal life. Joachim and Anne were made «seeds of justice» and collected «a fruit of life».”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ For example, Gaetano Passarelli (*Icons. Byzantine Festivities*, Madrid: LIBSA, 1999, p. 45) interprets it in this way.

⁶⁷ Damascène, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Image 7



The Nativity of Mary, fresco (mid 11th century), Hagia Sofia, Kiev, Ukraine.

Strengthening, if it is worth, the plausibility of the interpretation of these eggs as a suggestive metaphor of the eternal life that Jesus would ensure to Mankind it would be possible to bring these assertions of the doctor of Damascus: “Stay joyful, happy Anne, for having given birth to a woman. Since this woman will be Mother of God, the door of light, the source of life.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Image 8



The Nativity of Mary, fresco, c. c. 1265. Monastery of Sopoćani, Serbia. Detail of the bathing of newborn Mary.

The stack or bowl in which to the new-born is washed and the act itself of the ablution are also full of symbolism. Not few commentators, in effect, see in such elements a symbol of baptism, as a sacrament purifier of original sin. That is why the majority of these buckets or tubs in the paintings analyzed here have a form of baptismal font (*Menologium of Basil II*, Dafni, Kiev, Nerezi, Sopoćani, Djami Karije).

Image 9



The Nativity of Mary, fresco, late 13th century. Monastery of Gradac, Dalmacia, Croacia. Detail of the bathing of newborn Mary.

Also –and this interpretation of our own does not override the previous one, but completes and perfects it–, other experts interpret the stack with its purifying water as an analogy of Christ, who described himself as the living water that can quench in a definitive way the thirst of the thirsty, or even as a symbol of the own Virgin Mary, assumed as *Fons Vitae*, such as the pure and virginal source from whom the Water of Life (Jesus Christ) springs.

Image 10



The Nativity of Mary, mosaic, 2nd half of 11th century. Monastery of Dafni, Greece. Detail of the bathing of newborn Mary.

Perhaps these were the same ideas which John Damascene intuited when comparing to the Virgin Mary with the “Portico of the sheep”, that is to say, the Door adjacent to the Probatic Pool in Jerusalem, where the sheep were washed before being slaughtered in the temple of Solomon: according to the Syrian apologist, that probatic source, contradicting past events when the angel waving its water only once a year and healed only one paralytic, now it becomes, after the birth of Mary, in a universal source of healing for all the sheep that make up the spiritual flock of Christ. John Damascene poetically expresses so:

I welcome you, oh Portico of the sheep, ancestral home of the Mother of God (...), formerly the sheepfold of Joachim, now became the Church of the spiritual flock of Christ, this imitation of heaven. In another time you received once a year to the angel of God, waving the water and healed only one man freeing him of the evil that paralyzed him. Today you have here crowds of celestial powers that celebrate with us the Mother of God, the abyss of wonders, the source of the universal healing.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.